


ARCHIVE AND ASPIRATION

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Social memory remains a mystery to most of us. True, there has been much excellent work by psychologists, neurologists and other sorts of critics about the workings of collective memory. Yet, there is a deep gap between our understandings of the externalities of memory and its internalities. This is a kind of Cartesian gap too, this time not between mind and body but between the biochemistry of memory and its social locations and functions. The arrival of the electronic archive, with its non-hierarchical, digital and para-human characteristics, sometimes seems to have widened this gap, since there is no easy way to get from the neural maps implied in most visions of biological memory and the social maps referred to in such wonderful images as Pierre Nora's image of the 'places of memory'. This gap between the neural locus of memory and its social location creates a variety of challenges for different fields and disciplines.

Memory and the Archive

In the humanist imagination, the archive is no more than a social tool for the 

work of collective memory. It is a neutral, or even ethically benign, tool which is the product of a deliberate effort to secure the most significant portions of what Maurice Halbwachs called 'the prestige of the past'. Its quintessential expression is the document, a graphic trace, usually a written text, whose accidental survival has been reinforced by the protection offered to it by the archive. In this sense the archive is an empty box, a place, a site or an institution, whose special role is the guardianship of the document. Over time, the idea of the document has been broadened to include artifacts, monuments, products, even whole neighborhoods and cities. UNESCO's longstanding mission to conserve important monuments as tributes to human heritage is, in fact, a product of this ethical view of the archive as a container or body, animated by something less visible – usually the spirit of a people, the people, or humanity in general.

In this humanist perspective, there is from the start a Cartesian split, in which the archive lives, not because of its own materiality (its paper, its textures, its dust, its files, its buildings), but because of the spirit which animates these materials – the spirit of 'pastness' itself. Since no real understanding exists about this deep sacrality of the past as such, the archive is usually sacralized as the site of the past of some sort of cultural collectivity (often the nation), which is seen as sacred by definition. One result of this Cartesian split in the humanist understanding of the archive is that it has produced a derivative split which is even less desirable – the split between memory and desire, which I will turn to further on.

The central property of the archive in this humanist vision is to be found in the ideology of the 'trace' (Marc Bloch's famous way of speaking about the object of the historian's critical attention). This property is the product of contingency, indeed of accident, and not of any sort of design. The archive is fundamentally built on the accidents that produce traces. All design, all agency and all intentionalities come from the uses we make of the archive, not from the archive

itself. The very preciousness of the archive, indeed its moral authority, stems from the purity of the accidents that produced its traces. In this view, any hint of a deliberate effort to produce or protect a trace is a taint, to be spotted and eliminated by the historian's tools of triage.

After Foucault (especially after his early and brilliant work *Les Mots et Les Choses*), the gap that had been made sacred by Marc Bloch, between the accident of the trace and the critical work of the historian, became impossible to sustain. Foucault destroyed the innocence of the archive and forced us to ask about the designs through which all traces are produced. In his work on the clinic, on the fingerprint and on the physiology of crime, he showed that all evidence was born in some sort of nosological gaze. This insight is what made Foucault such an object of revulsion to many liberal-humanist historians.

Thus, after Foucault, we need a new way to look at the archive as a collective tool. Recognizing that the archive is not just a way to preserve accidental, but precious traces of collective memory, we need also to see that perhaps Foucault had too dark a vision of the panoptical functions of the archive, of its roles as an accessory to policing, surveillance and governmentality. The creation of documents and their aggregation into archives is also a part of everyday life outside the purview of the state. The personal diary, the family photo album, the community museum, the libraries of individuals are all examples of popular archives and, of course, oral archives have been repositories of intentional remembering for most of human history.

Thus, we should begin to see all documentation as intervention, and all archiving as part of some sort of collective project. Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is more frequently the product of the anticipation of collective memory. Thus the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection. This deep function of the archive has been obscured by that officializing mentality, ┐

closely connected to the governmentalities of the nation-state, which rests on seeing the archive as the tomb of the accidental trace, rather than as the material site of the collective will to remember.

In the age of the electronic archive, with the capability of interactive users to more easily enter and edit the archive, and for the archive itself to be expanded by the nature and distribution of its users (the logic of the 'hit' so beloved of website promoters), the active, interventionist and open-ended collective building of archives is a growing reality. Through personal websites, digital archives for all sorts of collectivities (both paid and free), storage sites in cyberspace for large data sets, and the possibility of sending pictures, sounds and text to multiple users with high speed and large amounts of high quality information, the archive is gradually freed of the orbit of the state and its official networks. And instead of presenting itself as the accidental repository of default communities, (like the nation), the archive returns to its more general status of being a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities.

These communities constitute a new and heterogeneous sociology, for they are not the products of a natural history of face-to-face interaction. They rely precisely on the absence or impossibility of the face-to-face. Whether they take the more standard forms, such as communities of expatriates, revolutionaries, artists or other interest-based groups, or of newer crypto-social forms, as in MUDDS, chatrooms and games such as SIMS, they invert the relationship between memory and connectivity. Where natural social collectivities build connectivities out of memory, these virtual collectivities build memories out of connectivity. And these memories do not usually refer to the natural genealogies of kinship, intimacy and everyday acquaintance. They rely on stretching the possibilities for miming sociality, for building whole identities through the conventions of 'false' identities, and for producing cloned socialities which attempt to construct full-

service social worlds out of ersatz pieces of identity, history and affinity. Interactive electronic spaces push prosthetic sociality to its edges, seeking a utopia of elective sociality over the drudgery of real time sociality. And in the newest forms, such as SIMS, we see the move away from fantasy in these 'game' environments to controlled spaces of quotidian sociality – shopping, home decoration, cooking and so on. In short, the fantasies to which these new electronic games aspire is the fantasy of restoring agency to the game of sociality, not of seeking an escape from the social as such.

In this context, the relation of collective memory to the archive may be seen as evolving two opposed faces. On the one hand, the newer forms of electronic archiving restore the deep link of the archive to popular memory and its practices, returning to the non-official actor the capability to choose the way in which traces and documents shall be formed into archives, whether at the level of the family, the neighborhood, the community or other sorts of groupings outside the demography of the state. On the other hand, the electronic archive, by allowing the formation of new prosthetic socialities, denaturalizes the relationship of memory and the archive, making the (interactive) archive the basis of collective memory, rather than leaving memory as the substrate which guarantees the ethical value of the archive. We are thus entering an era in which collective memory and the archive have mutually formative possibilities, thus allowing new traffic across the gap between the internalities and externalities of collective memory.

Migration, Memory and Archival Agency

In my book, *Modernity at Large* (1996), I suggested that in the era of globalization, the circulation of media images and the movement of migrants created new

disjunctures between location, imagination and identity. More specifically, I suggested that in many social locations throughout the world, especially those characterized by media saturation and migrant populations, 'moving images meet mobile audiences', thus disturbing the stability of many sender-receiver models of mass communication. This has many implications for what I then called 'the work of the imagination', and I particularly stressed the new potentials that this situation created for the proliferation of imagined worlds and imagined selves.

Migrants, especially the poorer migrants of this world, are not thriving in a world of free markets, consumer paradise or social liberation. They are struggling to make the best of the possibilities that are opened to them in the new relationships between migration and mass mediation. There is no doubt that migrants today, as migrants throughout human history, move either to escape horrible lives, to seek better ones, or both. The only new fact in the world of electronic mediation is that the archive of possible lives is now richer and more available to ordinary people than ever before. Thus, there is a greater stock of material from which ordinary people can craft the scripts of possible worlds and imagined selves. This does not mean that the social projects that emerge from these scripts are always liberating or even pleasant. But it is an exercise in what I have recently called 'the capacity to aspire'.

It is certainly true that migrants from the Punjab sometimes drown in the Mediterranean as they seek to swim to the shores of Italy or Spain from illegal boats, as do their Haitian counterparts in the Florida waters and others in the containers that cross the English Channel. It is also true that young women from the ex-socialist republics often end up brutalized as sex-workers in the border-zones between the old and new Europe, as do Philippine domestic workers in Milan and Kuwait, and South Asian laborers (both male and female) in Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Such examples of the brutalizing of migrants can be multiplied; poorer migrants today frequently end up as undocumented citizens,

objects of racist laws and sentiments, and sometimes as targets of ethnocidal violence in locations from Rwanda to Indonesia.

But is this suffering the whole story? Does it tell us everything we need to know about how these projects for movement were formed, about what efforts it took to summon the resources to move, of what was made possible by meager remittances, of how the relationship of men and women is often recalibrated under the conditions of migration, of the doors that are opened for migrant children, and, finally, of the value of negotiating for new opportunities, even in harsh circumstances? The work of the imagination, especially for poorer migrants, is critical for exercising the capacity to aspire. Without developing this capacity, which may also lead to rape, exploitation and death (for migration is a world of risk), poor migrants will always remain captive to the wishes of the vanguard, to the prison of their own domestic tyrannies and to the self-fulfilling prophecies of those business-class Marxists who always know, in advance, how best poor people should exercise their agency and which level of risk is most appropriate to them.

So I insist that the work of the imagination is not a privilege of elites, intellectuals and soi-disant Marxists, but is indeed being exercised by poor people, notably in the worldwide pursuit of their possibilities to migrate, whether to near or far locations. Denuding these proletarian projects of the dimension of fantasy, imagination and aspiration, reducing them to mere reflexes of the labor market or of some other institutional logic, does nothing for the poor other than to deny them the privilege of risk-taking. This is the opposite of what Charles Taylor calls 'recognition'.

In this perspective, what can we say about the place of the archive in the building of migrant identity? Here the idea of the living archive becomes especially useful. Migrants have a complex relationship to the practices of memory and, ┌

thus, to the making of archives, for several reasons. First, because memory becomes hyper-valued for many migrants – the practices through which collective memory is constructed are especially subject to cultural contestation and to simplification. Memory, for migrants, is almost always a memory of loss. But since most migrants have been pushed out of the sites of official/national memory in their original homes, there is some anxiety surrounding the status of what is lost, since the memory of the journey to a new place, the memory of one's own life and family world in the old place, and official memory about the nation one has left have to be recombined in a new location. Migration tends to be accompanied by a confusion about what exactly has been lost, and thus of what needs to be recovered or remembered. This confusion leads to an often deliberate effort to construct a variety of archives, ranging from the most intimate and personal (such as the memory of one's earlier bodily self) to the most public and collective, which usually take the form of shared narratives and practices.

Media plays a critical role in the construction of the migrant archive since circulation, instability and the disjunctures of movement always cast doubt on the 'accidental' trace through which archives are sometimes assumed to emerge. In the effort to seek resources for the building of archives, migrants thus often turn to the media for images, narratives, models and scripts of their own story, partly because the diasporic story is always understood to be one of breaks and gaps. Nor is this only a consumer relationship, for in the age of the internet, literate migrants have begun to explore email, chatrooms and other interactive spaces in which to find, debate and consolidate their own memory traces and stories into a more widely plausible narrative. This task, never free of contest and debate, sometimes does take the form of what Benedict Anderson disparagingly calls 'long-distance nationalism'. But long-distance nationalism is a complex matter, which usually produces many sorts of politics and many sorts of interest. In the age in which electronic mediation has begun to supplement and sometimes even supplant print mediation and older forms of communication, imagined commu-

nities are sometimes much more deeply real to migrants than natural ones. Here an excellent example is the eelam.com website (described by Pradip Jeganathan in *Public Culture* some years ago), which is a website for members of the imagined country called Eelam, the dream of some of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. Jeganathan is able to show that this website is a veritable sacred geography – far more than a sign or compass for the older geography on the ground. It is more than a sign or even a simulacrum. It is a primary and self-sustaining reality, involving many primary symptoms of belonging, and serves as a higher-order reality to which current geographies are held accountable. eelam.com is neither a game, nor a tool, nor a substitute for the real nation that Tamils in Sri Lanka imagine. It is that nation itself, rehearsed in cyberspace, and inclusive of its incomplete expression in the soil of Sri Lanka. Such examples of virtual geographies, with their own flags, boundaries, affections and affinities, exist in many diasporic communities, especially those that have produced separatist politics.

Interactive media thus play a special role in the construction of what we may call the diasporic public sphere (an idea I proposed in *Modernity at Large* to extend the insights of Habermas, Anderson and others about national public spheres), for they allow new forms of agency in the building of imagined communities. The act of reading together (which Anderson brilliantly identified in regard to newspapers and novels in the new nationalisms of the colonial world) are now enriched by the technologies of the web, the Internet and email, creating a world in which the simultaneity of reading is complemented by the interactivity of messaging. Thus, what we may call the diasporic archive, or the migrant archive, is increasingly characterized by the presence of voice, agency and debate, rather than of mere reading, reception and interpellation.

But the migrant archive operates under another constraint, for it has to relate to the presence of one or more narratives of public memory in the new home of the migrant, where the migrant is frequently seen as a person with only one story to

tell – the story of abject loss and need. In his or her new society, the migrant has to contend with the minority of the migrant archive, of the embarrassment of its remote references and of the poverty of its claims on the official 'places of memory' in the new site. Thus, the electronic archive becomes a doubly valuable space for migrants, for, in this space, some of the indignity of being minor or contemptible in the new society can be compensated, and the vulnerability of the migrant narrative can be protected in the relative safety of cyberspace.

What is more, both new electronic media, as well as traditional print media, among migrant communities allow complex new debates to occur between the memory of the old home and the demands of public narrative in the new setting. Migrant newspapers in many communities become explicit sites for debate between micro-communities, between generations and between different forms of nationalism. In this sense, the migrant archive is highly active and interactive, as it is the main site of negotiation between collective memory and desire. As the principal resource in which migrants can define the terms of their own identities and identity-building, outside the strictures of their new homes, the diasporic archive is an intensified form of what characterizes all popular archives: it is a place to sort out the meaning of memory in relationship to the demands of cultural reproduction. Operating outside the official spheres of both the home society and the new society, the migrant archive cannot afford the illusion that traces are accidents, that documents arrive on their own and that archives are repositories of the luck of material survival. Rather, the migrant archive is a continuous and conscious work of the imagination, seeking in collective memory an ethical basis for the sustainable reproduction of cultural identities in the new society. For migrants, more than for others, the archive is a map. It is a guide to the uncertainties of identity-building under adverse conditions. The archive is a search for the memories that count and not a home for memories with a pre-ordained significance.

Aspiration and the Memory Gap

As I suggested, something like a Cartesian gap had emerged in our understanding of the relationship between the internalities and the externalities of collective memory. In my discussion of the relationship between memory and the archive and of the specific features of the migrant archive, I proposed that we need to look at the archive, in the spirit of Foucault, less as a container of the accidental trace and more as a site of a deliberate project. This latter perspective offers us the beginnings of a way out of the Cartesian split between neuro-archives and social archives.

The archive as a deliberate project is based on the recognition that all documentation is a form of intervention and, thus, that documentation does not simply precede intervention, but is its first step. Since all archives are collections of documents (whether graphic, artifactual or recorded in other forms), this means that the archive is always a meta-intervention.

This further means that archives are not only about memory (and the trace or record) but about the work of the imagination, about some sort of social project. These projects seemed, for a while, to have become largely bureaucratic instruments in the hands of the state, but today we are once again reminded that the archive is an everyday tool. Through the experience of the migrant, we can see how archives are conscious sites of debate and desire. And with the arrival of electronic forms of mediation, we can see more clearly that collective memory is interactively designed and socially produced.

In turn this allows us to make see what lay behind the early insights of T.S. Eliot and Marcel Proust about the inner affinity of memory and desire. The archive, as an institution, is surely a site of memory. But as a tool, it is an instrument for the refinement of desire. Seen from the collective point of view, and keeping the

sociality of memory and the imagination in mind, such desire has everything to do with the capacity to aspire. For those who are not part of the literate avant-garde of their societies, the capacity to aspire is an especially precious resource. I have argued elsewhere that poverty may be described as an unequal distribution of the capacity to aspire, since aspiration thrives on the occasions for practising it as a capacity. Archives, viewed as active and interactive tools for the construction of sustainable identities, are important vehicles for building the capacity to aspire among those groups who need it most.

And in this link between memory and desire may also lie a way to close the gap between our understandings of neuro-memory and social memory. These two locations of memory may have different materialities and different architectures. But they meet in the body of agents, living persons who negotiate the gap between these terrains by building archives – bodily, electronic and institutional, in which new solidarities might produce memories, rather than just waiting for them.

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